StoryBuilding:
Engaging students in literacy learning through the imagination

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Best practice for building literacy skills

"Based on 80 reports (107 effect sizes), a causal link was found between classroom drama (enacting texts) and a variety of verbal areas. Most were of medium size (oral understanding, recall of stories, reading readiness, reading achievement, oral language, writing), one was large (written understanding/ recall of stories), and one was small and could not be generalized to other studies (vocabulary). In all cases, students who enacted texts were compared to students who read the same texts but did not enact them. Drama not only helped children's verbal skills with respect to the texts enacted; it also helped children's verbal skills when applied to new, non-enacted texts. Thus, drama helps children build verbal skills that transfer to new materials. Such an effect has great value for education: verbal skill is highly valued, adding such drama techniques costs little in terms of effort or expense, and a high proportion of children are influenced by such curricular changes."

-from REAP research at: www.pz.harvard.edu/Research/REAP.htm

ABOUT STORYBUILDING…

(Also called process drama)

The storybuilding process is active, creative and democratic, inviting all participants to exercise their imaginations as they learn: it is based on forty years of British teaching and research on the use of drama as a learning medium.

Storybuilding is "stand-up-and-do" literacy learning that asks students to construct events and then reflect on their meaning. The approach is grounded in the theory that students can only truly know what they can create and think on their own, and echoes the ancient Chinese proverb: "I hear and I forget, I see and I remember, I do and I understand." It also underscores the notion that children will yearn to become literate when they experience the power, enjoyment and personal relevance, and community values of good stories.

This work is not about performance; it is about mutual collaboration with language and experience. Students collaborate to create the story and also become their own reflective audience in the process. Away from the book, active engagement with story forms provides intense experience that develops literacy proficiency. During the storybuilding process, students undertake focused verbal interaction, develop listening skills, experience story construction (beginning, middle, and end), reflect on meaning, and can ultimately create written or visual expressions of their work.

Main practitioners of this teaching model, called Process Drama, can be traced back to England and Dorothy Heathcote, the master teacher who developed this approach in England in the 1960's. Her student, Dr. Cecily O'Neill has extended the work in the U.S., especially at Ohio State University when she was on the faculty and sponsored an annual conference in this approach.

StoryBuilding is usually a group activity. However, many features of this work can be easily adapted to one-on-one tutoring sessions. Main features of this approach are:

- STORY STRUCTURE – activities follow a narrative or story line
- LEADER-IN-ROLE – facilitators manage the creation of the story from inside, by taking on a role and inviting others to join in
- DYNAMIC ORGANIZATION – facilitators constantly shift use of space and group configuration to create momentum
- DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION – participants given equal opportunities to contribute
- QUESTIONING – asking "what if?" is the main way to move the story forward
- MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCES – activities include music, frozen tableaux, mime, visualizations, enactments, group collaborations, and problem solving, calling on a wide spectrum of learning styles

MULTIPLE INTELLIGENCE ACTIVITIES IN ONE-ON ONE TUTORING SESSIONS

Active children can often become more engaged in a tutoring session through "stand-up-and-do" experience – opportunities to get up out of their chair and engage in the central activities of the book. "Stand-up" activities can include:

ASKING FOR DEMONSTRATIONS OF AN ACTIVITY: All young children learn through "acting out." Before beginning a story – or even in the middle – you can engage children in demonstrations of the main activities. Say to the child: I'm not sure I know what "shooting a basket" would look like? How would you do it? Can you show me?

"WHAT IF" QUESTIONS RELATED TO ILLUSTRATIONS: Let's look around the room. If we were making pictures for a book, what could we choose? You can then ask the child "Will you be in the story? What will you be doing?" In this exercise you move from visual (what is seen) to demonstrations (what a child might do). After the choices have been made, work together to "tell" the story.

MAKING RHYMES WITH PHYSICAL MOTIONS: Many children's' songs will encourage both musical/rhythmic and physical/kinesthetic activities. You can select some books incorporating rhyme and motions *(When I First Came to This Land*), you can use rhymes you know (*Itsy Bitsy Spider),* or you can make up your own.

CREATING WALL ILLUSTRATIONS AS YOU READ: Post a large flip-chart paper on the wall where you tutor. This can be used to make large letterforms or create illustrations, allowing for "out-of-seat" activity.

WALK TO THE WINDOW: If the story has any "outdoor elements" in it, plan a walk to the window to check out what aspects of the story you can see from there. You can read a page or two at the window, then return to your seats.

TRAVELING READING: With any book, talk with children about "how" and "where" we see people read. Then you can construct a "traveling context" for your story. EXAMPLE: Duane really likes to read, wherever he is, whatever he is doing. He is very clever, because he can always read, no matter what else he is doing. What if you were Duane – what would be some of the hardest ways to read? Do you think we could read this book together as Duane might? Then let the child choose to sit, stand, lie on the floor, choosing a different posture every couple of pages.

Handout #1

Facilitation Tips for Storybuilding

This process requires facilitators to simultaneously consider specific features as they design and lead a set of activities. These features are:

Following Story Structure

Communities, families, and friends find mutuality, purpose, and meaning in shared stories. The storybuilding process allows stories to unfold through a series of activities that follow a narrative or story line. Facilitators design activities to advance the story, exploring alternative events, perspectives, and/or meanings.

Becoming Leader-in-Role

Facilitators manage the creation of the story from inside, taking on a role in the story and inviting others to join in. The leader can build ownership and esteem by casting participants as "experts," setting high standards for their contributions, and encouraging them to take responsibility. The facilitator as co-creator becomes a catalyst for the story and can ask for commitment, question responses, and model appropriate behavior to support student efforts.

Changing Group Dynamics

Storybuilding allows students to move around the room, work in constantly changing group configurations, and use space in new and interesting ways. The facilitator works to change the group dynamic with every activity; students begin in a whole group, then work alone, in pairs, small groups, large groups, and in forum style. A well-constructed session provides everyone with an opportunity to walk the room and work closely, at least once, with many participants.

Allowing for Democratic Participation

Activities usually ask participants to explore equal or similar roles simultaneously, allowing for choices (everyone playing the same part or else selecting their roles). Because giving everyone an equal voice requires time, facilitators often specify short forms in assigning activities, such as—"create a brief scene at the dinner table; everyone says just one thing."

Questioning

Storybuilding is about asking "what if," not about telling the story or telling students what to do. Questions, in the context of developing the story, will evoke thought, encourage response, and release participants into their own speculation and creativity. Student engagement will depend almost entirely on the facilitator's skill in framing activities around great questions and then asking them.

Learning Through Multiple Intelligences

Following the theories of Howard Gardner[1], a storybuilding facilitator can work through all the multiple intelligences as the story structure evolves. Music, frozen pictures (tableaux), mime, visualizations, enactments, discussions, writing, drawing, and analytical problem solving are among learning modes that can be included in a storybuilding structure.

Managing Time and Maintaining Momentum

The most engaging element and primary delight in any storybuilding structure is the collective sharing of imaginative work. This task presents facilitators with an enormous challenge: How can you honor the work of individuals and groups without getting stuck in time? Think of all those training sessions where 30 people are invited to introduce themselves and provide one interesting fact–before you know it, 30 minutes (half the session) is over.

A proactive strategy that will minimize this problem is to ask for activities in short forms, as in:

- Create a scene in which each person has just one line
- Write a letter of just two or three sentences
- Quickly sketch a cartoon (stick figures will do)
- Show in mime the moment (only a few seconds) that happened just before

If the story is very complex and this approach seems too limiting, you can allow participants to work more freely in their groups, but ask for condensed or edited forms when groups are sharing their work. Additional facilitation principles address the time issue and will help you keep the session moving, as described in the following examples:

Verbal responses (thoughts, conversations, scenes)
A mother and father have been asked to discuss (in pairs) what to do about a missing child; many pairs participated. Begin by asking one pair to share the two most important elements of their conversation, then ask other pairs to share if they have something new to add. When responses seem repetitive, ask for only something amazing and unsaid, what must be told.

Written responses (journals, letters, reports)
Students have written journal entries about a friend in trouble. It can be very interesting to arrange this sharing through another party (journals are found by friends or parents). Ask the third party to read aloud to the group, but only the one sentence they think is key.

Physical responses (frozen pictures or tableaux, mime)
Each group has created tableaux of the main character in peril. Quickly organize each picture by calling: one, two, three, freeze. Then ask viewers to describe what they see in a word or two, finally asking for a title, headline style, that depicts the action.

Visual work (drawings, murals, graffiti)
Participants create a mural expressing student attitudes toward a new school rule. Instead of asking each person to explain what they did, assemble them all as school psychologists and ask them to consider the mural as a whole–what themes or basic emotions are expressed?

Appreciating and Extending Imaginative Work

The primary role of a session facilitator is to appreciate all contributions. Discouraging inappropriate responses can best be accomplished through peer judgments, for instance: A wizard suggests a magic object that will blow up the finder and you ask: *what do you other great wizards think, is this the kind of magic the world needs?* You can stimulate imaginations and broadening the range of responses by providing additional praise for unique contributions.

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[1] Gardner, H. (1993). *Multiple intelligences: The theory in practice.* New York: Basic Books.

Story Construction Chart

ACTIVITY CONSTRUCTION	Example: *Nothing but the Truth*	Example: *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*	Your Choice.....
1. In large group, convey expert role(s) to participants. Assign a purpose and a task/activity (sometimes done in pairs), and then share results with the whole group. Mantle of the expert provides a need for expertise, moves imagination into the story, coaxes participants to respond.	**Roles:** Award-winning journalists, known for integrity **Purpose:** Analyze effects of journalism on their lives and others **Activity:** Discuss perceptions of press/media today **Group:** Whole, in circle, then mixing	**Roles:** Most powerful wizards in the world **Purpose:** Solve problems with magic among earthlings **Activity:** Put new magic objects on the earth to provide what's needed for a better life **Group:** Whole, in circle	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**
2. Now ask "experts" to enter the story and take on other roles as requested, to understand all perspectives related to the experience. Begin with an individual central to the story. Assign a task to explore the protagonist's relationship to the event or actions that trigger the story.	**Roles:** Troubled teens in morning classroom **Purpose:** Come up with a teen's reasons for "acting different" **Activity:** Classroom—three students "act out" during announcements; teachers discuss what to do; students write in journals **Group:** Whole group, five assigned	**Role:** Sylvester (S) and S's thoughts **Purpose:** Explore what happens to S when he's lucky, finds magic **Activity:** Give voice to S's racing thoughts **Group:** Whole, one assigned as S	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**
3. Urge participants to explore roles closest to the protagonist, and assign an activity that will illuminate this relationship (teens with peers, parents and child).	**Roles:** Friends of suspended teens (small groups) **Purpose:** Find out what's going on with their friend **Activity:** Talk in groups, gossiping, then write in journal **Group:** Small groups, then individual	**Role:** Dangers in S's world **Purpose:** Explore fears in a child's environment **Activity:** Portray, in freeze frames, possible dangers on S's journey home **Group:** Small groups of four to five	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**

ACTIVITY CONSTRUCTION	Example: *Nothing but the Truth*	Example: *Sylvester and the Magic Pebble*	Your Choice.....
4. Extend consideration of the story, through roles, to the broader community, exploring additional perspectives, perhaps unsympathetic to the protagonist.	**Roles:** Track coaches, teachers, administrators **Purpose:** Explore student behavior from perspective of building staff **Activity:** Discuss what should be done with students **Group:** Divide into three groups	**Roles:** Sylvester's mother and father (pairs), then neighbors **Purpose:** Decide what to do about missing child **Activity:** Talk to each other, then to community **Group:** Pairs, then whole group	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**
5. Return to earlier roles to examine new story events. Rotate activities between intimate relationship roles and the larger community as the story demands, not always in the same order.	**Roles:** Teen's parents and siblings **Purpose:** Communicate with teen about suspension **Activity:** Create tableaux of dinner table scene when teen's suspension is introduced **Group:** Small groups of four to five	**Roles:** Sylvester's family—parents, siblings, aunts **Purpose:** Explore the influence of time on loss and grief **Activity:** Create dinner table conversation (one line for each person) **Group:** Small groups of four	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**
6. Seek opportunities for participants to play roles that will reengage them with the experience(s) of the main protagonist as you conclude the session.	**Roles:** Everyone is member of sports team **Purpose:** Learn who will/won't advocate for students in trouble **Activity:** Answer coaches **Group:** Half group, then the other half	**Roles:** Everyone is Sylvester **Purpose:** Explore effects of a year as a rock **Activity:** Individually portray the "rock" and voice S's thoughts **Group:** Individuals	**Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**
7. Return to the original "expert" roles of participants for a whole-group reflection. The purpose of the first activity should be addressed here; recommendations for a better world should be sought from the group.	**Roles:** Award-winning journalists, known for integrity **Purpose:** Think about the role press/media should play in story **Activity:** Discuss, then write news story that would have positive effects **Group:** Whole group, then choice—individuals or teams	**Roles:** Most powerful wizards in the universe **Purpose:** Think up ways to prevent magic going awry **Activity:** Create or enact these ideas (write user manual/create training program, etc.) **Group:** Whole group, then teams	**Roles:** **Purpose:** **Activity:** **Group:**

Dynamic Organization Guide:
Rotating group size and presentation mode

GROUP SIZES AND CHARACTERSITICS	PRESENTATION MODES
Whole group: Addressing and engaging the whole group creates community identity (a shared story), and is essential at the beginning and end, and at critical points to jointly reflect on the story's meaning.	**Discuss:** Small groups try roles, practice what is said, but only discuss what happened to the whole group. Use discussion early on, to remove performance pressure and build comfort within the group.
Half group: Splitting the group in half allows for exploration of opposing points of view, or for half to observe or create atmosphere/context.	**Tableaux/Freeze Frames:** Groups (each with a role) create a key moment, a photo frozen in time—nonverbal, visual depictions of action and emotion.
Three groups: Dividing the whole group into three will develop diverse perspectives or experience and requires simple tasks, as many collaborate.	**Mime:** Group pantomimes are often easier to develop and more visual than scenes with dialogue. Good pantomimes tend to illuminate emotions.
Forum (large group/a few): Creating a Greek chorus effect, the forum mode engages whole community to interpret or influence actions of a few.	**Scenes:** Each participant defines their role and speaks one or two lines, providing a range of perspectives on the story.
Small group (3-4-6): Selecting group size according to role (family members, coworkers, friends) explores intimate social relationships.	**Art:** Individuals sketch reactions, create portraits, draw cartoons; groups collaborate on community murals, graffiti, quilts, etc.
Pairs: Working in pairs creates the greatest opportunity for simultaneous participation, creating maximum engagement but requiring the most time to collect responses.	**Writing:** Individuals record personal emotions and views in journals, lists, letters. Groups collaborate on rules, reports, song lyrics, commercials, etc.
Individual: Allowing individuals to contribute parts of the story opens the work to personal reactions and emotions.	**Singing:** Groups collaborate on chants, jingles, folk songs, pop, hip-hop, and other cultural music appropriate to the action (short, one-verse).